Words.

By Tom Banaszewski

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In the short history of the United States, these are considered some of the most important words ever penned to paper.

Fifty years after he helped write the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson continued to champion these revolutionary ideas.

In his last letter, written ten days before both he and John Adams died, Jefferson wrote to a friend that he hoped the Declaration would serve as a "signal of the blessings of self-government to an ever evolving world."

I wonder if he would be surprised by how his young nation grew up to help spread democracy to so many parts of the world.

Of the contagious chant of "Revolution" that toppled so many governments.

Would he be proud of our forced efforts to bring self-government to the Middle East?

Could he have imagined a world where the pursuit of happiness held such diverse meanings to so many people?

Where freedom of religion pitted nation...

...and neighbor against one another?

Liberty and the pursuit of happiness have always been at the expense of others.

Nearly 3000 American troops and 60,000 Iraqi civilians have died in the effort to bring "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" to the land where civilization began.

The contradictions tied to these famous words are as ripe today as they were when Jefferson proclaimed equality for all while prospering from and protecting the institution of slavery.

It would take another two centuries before equality for all in the United States was written into the Constitution. President Johnson conceded that we could no longer maintain the hypocrisy of celebrating the famous phrases of the Founding Fathers while denying their benefits to so many and finally gave teeth to the Civil Rights Act.

I try to remind myself that this country is still very young; that this experiment in democracy is still being tested; that a nation founded on a few radical words can alter the course of history.

Thomas Jefferson did not proclaim to have all the answers to the challenges of sustaining an effective democracy. He set the compass of the country pointing in a direction that empowered the individual states to dictate future courses of action.

In the recent state elections, the people exercised their power and swung control of the Congress back to the Democrats. Regardless of your political views, this is a good thing. Democracy still works.

The next presidential election marks an historic opportunity. With Hillary Clinton and Barak Obama running for president, our country has evolved to the moment when we will test those deeply charged words of "we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

Will it be finally be self-evident?

That a successful democracy depends on the true and accurate representation of

ALL of its citizens.